

Diary Shows

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George Bush's Iran-contra diary entries show that he was more active than previously known in trying to contain what became the biggest political scandal in the Reagan-Bush administration as well as in revealing his frustrations over being Ronald Reagan's vice president.

Bush's sometimes rambling, sometimes confusing dictations in November and December 1986 were released by the White House Friday in the final week of Bush's presidency.

Hundreds of additional pages from the long-secret transcripts of Bush's dictated diary, covering developments in the scandal through 1988, have been turned over to independent counsel Lawrence E. Walsh, but the White House has not made them public.

A main theme of Bush's Iran-contra musings was, as he said on Nov. 26, 1986, the difficulty of "trying to weather the storm."

"[P]eople will say, 'Well, why didn't you do something about it?'" Bush said. "People not recognizing always that vice presidents don't always have chances to 'do something' about anything, given the myth about vice presidents."

He dictated those thoughts the day after Reagan turned down Bush's suggestion that as vice president he chair an investigation of the diversion of profits from the administration's secret arms sales to Iran to aid the contra rebels in Nicaragua. Two top aides, national security adviser John M. Poindexter and National Security Counsel aide Oliver L. North, were ousted.

In nominating himself to "head the investigatory panel," Bush told his diary that he recognized such an appointment "might look so close to the chicken coop that the fox would be guarding it." But to counter that impression, Bush said he proposed "in my little memo to the president that I quietly take a polygraph test on any embarrassing questions...."

Although sources said he never took one, Bush mentions his determination to take a polygraph test

several times. Three days later, on Nov. 29, there were news reports about how a top Bush aide, Donald H. Gregg, had been involved with North's secret resupply network for the contras.

Faced with that, Bush dictated: "I am more than ever determined to try to take a polygraph—to have it in the bank just so that it will be known that I have gone the extra mile."

"Marin [Fitzwater, White House spokesman] says it is explosive, but I don't see anything wrong with doing that kind of thing," Bush continued. "I'm confident that I've told the truth and whether that's a good thing to have done or not, I just don't know."

Up to that point, the only public statement Bush had made about the scandal was that he supported the president.

Bush began his diary Nov. 4, 1986, by stressing that he was "one of the few people who knew fully the details" about the arms sales. When Secretary of State George P. Shultz complained to him Nov. 9 that he felt cut out of the Iran situation, Bush told his diary, "I did not discuss the facts with him" but simply counseled Shultz to back the president.

By Nov. 21, Shultz was saying that Poindexter had to leave or that he, Shultz, would quit. Bush described the events that week as "the toughest of [Reagan's] presidency."

That same day, Bush learned he had been excluded from a meeting among Reagan, Poindexter, Attorney General Edwin Meese III and White House Chief of Staff Donald P. Regan. As Bush understood it, they discussed how to handle "some new revelation" that arms were shipped to Iran in 1985 despite the fact that the president had said there were no such shipments.

Bush complained to his diary, "I am the one guy who can give the president objective advice and I have felt a twinge as to why the hell they didn't include me, but on the other

Bush 'Trying to Weather the Storm' on Iran-Contra

hand, you wind up not dragged into the mess."

That same day, Nov. 21, Bush began thinking of ways in which he could help Reagan. "I told Jimmy Baker [Bush's close friend and then treasury secretary] today that I would like to find a way to help the president," Bush said. He began to hatch plans for an Iran-contra speech acknowledging that selling arms to Iran was, "in retrospect, a mistake."

Bush tested the idea on close friends, according to his diary entry for that day. "Tonight Janet Steiger [a Bush appointee to the Federal Trade Commission] seemed to think that this would calm some of the storms. I told Jimmy Baker this and he is strongly opposed to my doing that. He thinks it will drag me into

something that I have not been dragged into."

Bush argued with himself about what to do, suggesting in his diary that "there would be some short-run affirmation of character if I would go out and say, 'Well, I've thought of this and I can no longer remain silent.' I must go out and say, 'I think what's happened is despicable. . . .'"

But then, he added, "I'm not about to start that. I don't believe it. . . . The president must know that he can have the vice president for him. . . ."

In mid-December, as congressional probes intensified, Bush told his diary that he favored limited immunity for North and Poindexter so they could testify that Reagan knew nothing about the diversion.

On Dec. 10, Bush dictated, "dis-

cussion this morning in with the president. He'd like to testify. Don [Regan]'s going to check it out. . . ."

If the president can make a pre-Christmas dramatic statement before somebody, even under oath, telling that he has told the truth about not knowing it, I think that will do an awful lot toward getting that behind us."

When that idea failed to materialize, Bush said in his diary on Dec. 17: "We now have to get North and Poindexter to come forward and do what they ought to do."

That same day, Lt. Col. Terry Matthe, a Bush military aide, spoke with North and his lawyer, Brendan Sullivan. According to North's book, "Under Fire," a Bush military aide, whom North did not name, "sug-

gested that I waive my Fifth Amendment rights and absolve the president of any responsibility."

North resisted, writing that he was convinced Reagan "knew everything" and approved the diversion "enthusiastically."

"[N]obody from the administration ever asked me to tell the truth," North wrote. "The only message I ever heard was: exonerate the president."

In his diary for Dec. 18, Bush recorded: "Terry Matthe talked with North. He knows that North would like to do this and I am convinced both North and Poindexter will. But it is hard to get them to take action when their lawyers are diametrically opposed."